

The Arrowmaker

The story of the arrowmaker, the "man made of words," is perhaps the first story I was told. My father loved to tell it to me, and I loved to hear it. It remains for me one of the most intensely vital stories in my experience, not only because it is a supernal example of the warrior idea—an adventure story in the best sense—but because it is a story about story, about the efficacy of language and the power of words. One does not come to the end of such a story. I have lived with the story of the arrowmaker for many years, and I am sure that I do not yet understand it in all of its consequent meanings. Nor do I expect to understand it so. The stories I keep close to me, day by day, are those that yield more and more of their spirit in time.

If an arrow is well made, it will have tooth marks upon it. That is how you know. The Kiowas made fine arrows and straightened them in their teeth. Then they drew them to the bow to see that they were straight.

Once there was a man and his wife. They were alone at night in their tepee. By the light of a fire the man was making arrows. After a while he caught sight of something. There was a small opening in the tepee where two hides had been sewn together. Someone was there on the outside, looking in. The man went on with his work, but he said to his wife, "Someone is standing outside. Do not be afraid. Let us talk easily, as of ordinary things." He took up an arrow and straightened it in his teeth; then, as it was right for him to do, he drew it to the bow and took aim, first in this direction and then in that. And all the

while he was talking, as if to his wife. But this is how he spoke: "I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name." But there was no answer, and the man went on in the same way, pointing the arrow all around. At last his aim fell upon the place where his enemy stood, and he let go of the string. The arrow went straight to the enemy's heart.

Until very recently the story of the arrowmaker has been the private possession of a few, a tenuous link in that most ancient chain of language which we call the oral tradition; tenuous because the tradition itself appears to be so, for as many times as the story has been told, it has always been but one generation removed from extinction. That is to say, it has been neither more nor less durable than the human voice, and neither more nor less concerned to express the meaning of the human condition.

The story of the arrowmaker is a remarkable act of the imagination, a realization of words and meanings that is altogether simple and direct, yet nonetheless rare and profound, and it illustrates more clearly than anything else in my own experience something of the essential character of the imagination—and in particular of that personification which in this instance emerges from it: the man made of words.

It is important that the story of the arrowmaker returns in a special way upon itself. It is about language, after all, and it is therefore part and parcel of its own subject. Virtually, there is no difference between the telling and that which is told. The point of the story lies not so much in what the arrowmaker does, but in what he says—and, indeed, *that* he says it. The principal fact is that he speaks, and in so doing he places his very life in the balance.

It is this aspect of the story which interests me most, for it is here that the language becomes most conscious of itself; here we are very close to the origin and object of literature; here our sense of the verbal dimension is very keen, and we are aware of something in the nature of language that is at once perilous and compelling. "If you are a Kiowa,

The arrowmaker is preeminently the man made of words. He has consummate being in language; it is the world of his origin and of his prism.

The story of the arrowmaker is supremely metaphorical; indeed it is acutely and incisively a story about story; it is both an example and a definition of literature. It is complex, and yet it is clear; it seems to give more and more of itself in time. Clear it is, and yet there is a kind of resistance in it, as in a riddle; it is the richer for that. It is a kind of that truth.

The story is meaningful. It is so because it is in the nature of language that it proceeds to the formulation of meaning. Moreover, the story of the arrowmaker especially centers upon this procession of words toward meaning. It seems in fact to turn upon the very idea that language involves the elements of risk and responsibility; and in this it seeks to confirm itself. In a word, it seems to say, everything is a risk. That may well be true, and it may also be that the whole of literature rests upon

irrevocable, and it ends in the restoration of order and well-being. enemy; twice the storyteller tells us so. The venture is complete and maker reveal his peril clearly. The presence outside is decidedly an crucial advantage over him. Make no mistake, the words of the arrow his enemy is, and is present, and that he, the arrowmaker, has gained a and the arrowmaker knows at once what he has not known before; that is returned to him on the sheer edge of meaning. But there is no answer, the most nominal sign that he is understood, that a word or a syllable of the ominous unknown he asks only the utterance of a name, only way with words. "Let us talk easily, as of ordinary things," he says. And instinctively and with great care he deals in the most honest and basic whole knowledge, and it represents the only chance he has for survival. ventures to speak because he must; language is the repository of his his definition and all of his destiny, and by implication all of ours. He his reality consists in language. Implicit in his simple speech is all of Precisely at this moment is the arrowmaker realized completely, and

and a plea. Everything is ventured in this simple declaration, which is also a question you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name."

A word, then, on an essential irony which marks the story and gives peculiar substance to the man made of words. The storyteller is nameless and unlabeled. We know very little about him, except that in the story is his presence and his mask. And that is enough. He tells of his life in language, and of the risk involved. It occurs to us that he is one with the arrowmaker, and that he has survived, by word of mouth, beyond other men. For the storyteller, for the arrowmaker, language does indeed represent the only chance for survival. It is appropriate that he survives in our time and that he has survived over a period of untold generations.

And yet the story has it that he is cautious and alone, and we are given to understand that his peril is great and immediate, and that he confronts it in the only way he can. I have no doubt that this is true. Language determines the arrowmaker, and his story determines our literary experience.

the unknown darkness and beyond.

imagine him, and he imagines himself, whole and vital, going on into that of men in general—he has nearly a perfect right to be. We can which the arrowmaker has a quality of being that is more viable than of infinite possibility. I have come to believe that there is a sense in posterity, and there is no other. But it is a world of definite reality and